

Chapter 13

**‘Normalisation’ in the
GDR in Retrospect:
East German Perspectives
on Their Own Lives**

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What is subjectively perceived as ‘normal’, or indeed as ‘good’ and ‘desirable’, varies markedly among people of different social, political, cultural, and generational groups. And patterns of subjective perception do not always map neatly onto the ‘external’ history of a state; perhaps least of all in the case of the GDR, which in terms of political history—divided, occupied, walled in—was far from conforming to generally current western conceptions of the ‘normality’ of a modern sovereign state. How did and do East Germans view their own lives in retrospect?

The evidence of a survey carried out in 2005, fifteen years after unification, provides insights into retrospective perceptions of ‘normality’ among East Germans, and highlights what now seems important to them about the GDR in explicit comparison with experiences of life in united Germany.¹ The survey produced some surprising preliminary results, most notably in terms of divergent approaches to the GDR among dif-

1. I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for financial support for this research. I am extremely grateful to Silvia Dallinger for her work on this survey during an internship as an Honorary Research Assistant; to Erica Fulbrook for assisting me in inputting data from the questionnaires into an SPSS database; and particularly to all of the anonymous East Germans who were willing to take the time and trouble to assist in the project, to fill in a very lengthy questionnaire and to express their views on the lives they had led and the states they had lived in, both literally and subjectively. I hope I have not done the richness of their views too much of an injustice in the analysis which follows.

ferent generations; these generational patterns will form a major focus of the discussion that follows. This research provides general support for the thesis—widely evidenced in the case of West Germany in the 1950s—that a sense of ‘normality’ or ‘normalisation’ is more likely to be pervasive when the experiences of private lives and the intrusions of broader historical-political developments do not seem to run in parallel; when the ‘good times’ and ‘bad times’ in one’s own life appear, in subjective perceptions, to be unrelated to the wider world in which the individual is living. The material also sustains the view that East Germans lived multi-faceted, many-layered lives, in which ‘high politics’ was for most people most of the time a matter of relatively subordinate concern; and in which people were capable of simultaneously participating in, sustaining, and criticising state structures, ideas, and institutions, and holding highly differentiated sets of views on different aspects of life in the GDR, rendering suspect any simple distinctions between ‘state’ and ‘society’.² The ways in which East Germans reflect on the constraints and parameters of living in and through the specific conditions of the GDR further suggest a very strong awareness of norms and unwritten ‘rules’ according to which one had to behave; or in the light of which one could predict adverse consequences if one did not; and indeed, surprisingly, some of which many East Germans actively valued in retrospect. The material discussed here, while quite clearly limited in a number of ways outlined below, both tends to support the thesis of normalisation processes as far as internalisation of key norms or ‘playing by the rules’ is concerned, and suggests key differences in the experience of the GDR across different social groups and generations.

History and Life Stories: Theoretical Considerations

This chapter focuses on how, in 2005, a sample of ‘ordinary East Germans’ represented their own lives; which is not to suggest that these retrospective self-presentations provide definitive answers to the question of ‘what the GDR was actually like’, if one may phrase this in rather naïve Rankean terms. The subjective perceptions of individuals, whether captured in some way in records at the time or later, may, if viewed from other perspectives, be entirely mistaken, even reprehensible in their self-centred emphases and related sins of omission (for example, the way in which many ‘Aryan’ Germans designated the 1930s as the ‘good times’, ignoring

2. I have developed this argument in Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005).

the exploitation, exclusion, and repression of those excluded from Hitler's *Volksgemeinschaft*); they are not necessarily any guide to 'how things really were' as far as the broader picture is concerned. On the other hand, people's own perceptions affect how they act and react: whether or not their 'social diagnoses'—over-estimations, underestimations, blind spots, misperceptions—constitute an accurate assessment of the society in which they are living and in which they participate, their subjective perceptions and their retrospective accounts of their life stories are themselves social phenomena with consequences for their behaviour, and hence of considerable interest to historians.

Life stories are not accurate guides to history, nor are they necessarily even truthful versions of an individual biography. The ways in which 'life stories' are later narrated are generally not full and detailed representations even of the individual's own life, but are, rather, ever-developing and frequently changing ways of emplotting or 'making sense' of personal experiences and development in ways with which the narrator can comfortably live; and their construction is generally in some way 'appropriate' to, even actively constructed by, the context in which and the audience to whom the story is narrated, in respect of which certain aspects will be highlighted, others downplayed or even suppressed entirely. This is perhaps clearest with reference to the quite extreme examples of life stories from the Third Reich, and there is by now quite a substantial literature on problems of memory and representation among the survivors and perpetrators of the Nazi system.³ Some research suggests, for example, that former perpetrators and victims have systematic tendencies to narrate their own stories in rather different ways: those who were (even in a very small way, in the general scale of Third Reich criminality) on the side of the 'perpetrators' tend to play up their own alleged 'victimhood'; yet by contrast, genuine victims of Nazi persecution are more likely to frame their stories in terms of active attempts to deal with an intolerable situation—survivors' tales of escape, of attempted rescue of others—and often find it too painful to talk of failures, separation, or death. While the 'perpetrators' might talk endlessly, recounting stories of heroism in which there are no victims, or in which they appear almost as the only 'victims', genuine survivors

3. See for example: Daniel Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Gabriele Rosenthal, ed., *The Holocaust in Three Generations* (London: Cassell, 1998); Harold Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, *"Opa war kein Nazi": Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2002); and for earlier 'tales', Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

often find that the act of talking involves a 'bringing back' or verbal articulation of inchoate emotions and memories that are too painful to live with. These generalisations relate only, of course, to those willing to talk 'honestly' in situations forming part of scholarly research, sometimes with an additional therapeutic dimension.⁴ The situation is very different with respect to those recounting aspects of their life stories in the context of investigations into war crimes, where individuals accused of complicity in mass murder will inevitably present merely self-exculpatory tales. Moreover, juxtaposition of the life stories of those accused and the testimonies of people brought as witnesses often reveals that the latter were in no position to have accurate knowledge of who really lay behind the immediate acts of violence and brutality to which they could testify—one of the reasons why the notorious 'desk perpetrators' of Nazi Germany on the whole managed so successfully to evade being brought to juridical account for their involvement in systematic mass murder. In a quite different setting, research suggests that intergenerational transmission of stories will serve to soften and ameliorate the deeds of grandparents by the time the story is the subject of broader familial discussion, with children and grandchildren having a particular interest in reserving an unsullied love for their immediate relatives—an outcome not always possible, depending on how public the misdeeds of the parents or grandparents had been.⁵ The problem of intergenerational 'coming to terms with' the Nazi period is often one of a long and slow retelling and reconstructing of both the lives and the life stories which form part of making a new life. The context in which a 'life story' is told, then, will have considerable implications for the ways in which people represent their own past lives.

These general considerations hold true in principle, if in rather different ways in practice, for exploring the ways in which, after the collapse of the GDR and unification with the Federal Republic, East Germans represented their own views and recounted the ways in which they had led their own lives in the GDR. The communist dictatorship in Eastern Germany was an oppressive regime effectively containing its population by the threat or use of force; but those seeking to equate it with the Nazi

4. As in the research reported in Rosenthal, ed., *Holocaust in three Generations*, where this argument about the contrasting modes of recounting victim and perpetrator pasts is made.

5. See particularly Welzer et al., *Opa war kein Nazi*. There have been several recent autobiographical accounts by individuals seeking to come to terms with their own families' rather more public Nazi pasts (Frank, Himmler, Scheub), as well as those whose relatives were victims (Monika Maron), or whose relatives, despite Nazi inclinations eventually became part of the resistance (Wibke Bruhns), as well as the highly belated autobiographical revelations of SS-membership as a youngster on the part of Günther Grass.

dictatorship have to be reminded that the GDR was informed by a very different political set of ideals, and that despite the denial of human rights, the GDR was nowhere near either as murderous or as aggressive as the preceding Nazi regime. It was, moreover, unlike the Third Reich, relatively stable—at least during the middle period between the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the economic decline and renewed Cold War from 1979, with the concomitant growth of political unrest in the Gorbachev era in the later 1980s. Many East Germans, however much they had hated the SED gerontocracy and had criticised the political repression and the mismanagement of the economy to the point of collapse, and however ecstatic they had been about the breaching of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and unification with the Federal Republic in 1990, were somewhat taken aback and surprised at the character of the discussions following unification. A widespread sense of unease at the simplistic two-dimensional representations of a vilified regime, with an overwhelming focus on repression and fear, was to some extent counteracted by a concomitant rise in ‘*Ostalgie*’, nostalgia for a lost form of society, as well as a belated recuperation of the GDR as comedy in novels and films. Heated public debates on modes of ‘overcoming’ and representing the East German dictatorship, which exploded in the early 1990s, have continued, if in new forms, in the early twenty-first century. Self-exculpatory autobiographical presentations of former senior politicians or officials of the Ministry for State Security (*Stasi*), for example, or of former unofficial collaborators (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, IMs) continue to be critiqued; individual stories of persecution and political opposition have been highlighted, and members of organisations such as the *Bund der stalinistisch Verfolgten* continue to articulate claims for compensation for injustices suffered at the hands of the communist regime. Controversial commissions have been established to explore ways of interpreting and representing the past, from the Federal Parliamentary Investigative Commissions (*Enquetekommissionen des Bundestages*) of the 1990s through to the ‘Sabrow commission’ evaluating different memory cultures and modes of representing the past in 2006. People’s representations of their own lives in the early twenty-first century were thus taking place in a very different historical context from that of, say, the late 1980s or the early 1990s.⁶

6. For an extremely interesting set of oral history interviews carried out by western researchers in the GDR in 1987, see Lutz Niethammer, Dorothee Wierling, and Alexander von Plato, *Die Volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991).

The question necessarily arises of whose life stories are being represented, and what implications this selective self-representation has for understanding what the GDR was like for the 'silent majority', given the fact that only the articulate, or those presenting their past in a manner catching the attention of the media or publishing houses, generally find a historical voice in the form of 'ego-documents'. Hence the decision to try to explore the life stories and self-representations of those who were not brought into the limelight by virtue of their political prominence, whether in support of or in opposition to the regime; and those who had no compelling desire—or time, ability, articulacy, funding, publishing outlets—to 'tell their own story', but who often felt that the society through which they had lived was not being appropriately represented through the stories told by others. The findings reported here make no claim to presenting a comprehensive view of life in the GDR; rather, they seek to provide at least some indication of how the GDR was seen, fifteen years after its demise, by arguably the majority of the East German population, who did not have a 'voice' in the published arena with its focus on intellectuals, dissidents, *Stasi* informants, top politicians, church-people, and other prominent individuals.

It has undoubtedly to be borne in mind, when considering in more detail the findings outlined below, that the respondents in this survey were representing their lives in the context of a united Germany in which many felt they were 'losers'. As one put it: 'Since I belong to those who have work, it should be going well for me. Unfortunately not! My husband (a building worker) cannot get work and so I am the sole breadwinner for our family. Money is tight everywhere. We have not been on holiday for ages now. We feel we are the "losers of the nation" (*Verlierer der Nation*).'⁷ Others objected to what they saw as the 'victor's viewpoint' (*Siegersicht*) in western portrayals of the GDR—including critiques of this survey as allegedly influenced by such views.⁸ Some claimed that 'GDR-people are treated now as 2nd or 3rd class' citizens in the new Germany.⁹ A cynic might argue that such views inevitably mean that the GDR is seen in far rosier terms in hindsight—and even some respondents drew attention to this in their own memories, although as one elderly respondent (born in 1919) put it: while people always tend to see 'what has passed as better

7. QN 101, female, born 1961. For details of the surveys, see the methodological discussion below. Comments from the larger study are referenced by QN followed by the relevant number; all statistical analyses are based on this body of material.

8. QN 206, male, born 1948.

9. QN 219, female, born 1948.

than the present . . . who would not like to forget certain [unpleasant] events in the past? But precisely these are the things he can never forget!’¹⁰ A whiff of ‘*Ostalgie*’ or nostalgia for the way things never were in a mythologised lost ‘*Heimat DDR*’ undoubtedly hovers around at least some of the questionnaires. Yet the responses are generally also highly differentiated, with due criticism being targeted at many of the all too evident failings of the GDR system, as well as retrospective praise for aspects of the invisible fabric of social life and relationships which are not so evident to the western observer’s eye; the pictures East Germans paint of the past are quite complex. The responses are in any event of interest, given that the very object of analysis is perceived experience. Most interesting, in some respects, is the fact that there are highly distinctive patterns in retrospective perceptions. Once one delves beyond the rough overall view and starts to explore in more detail the variations in patterns of remembered experience between different generational groups, some extremely interesting contrasts emerge, demanding more detailed reflection and further exploration.

Some Methodological Issues: The Survey and the Sample

Before discussing the findings, it is essential to make a few methodological comments about the nature of this particular piece of research. While oral history interviews may be highly suggestive, generalisations based on these can be problematic, particularly when the sample is very small or restricted to one particular social group.¹¹ The attempt here was rather to combine quantitative and qualitative material across a representative cross-section of the population that might provide a basis for broader conclusions.

Following a smaller survey during 2004/5 using approximately 80 lengthy questionnaires combining quantitative with qualitative and open-ended questions, around 350 revised questionnaires were administered in the summer of 2005 to East German residents born between 1917 and 1977.¹² In total, 271 of

10. QN 253, male, born 1919.

11. For a thorough and insightful example of the use of oral history interviews, see Dorothee Wierling, *Geboren im Jahr Eins. Der Geburtsjahrgang 1949 in der DDR. Versuch einer Kollektivbiographie* (Berlin, 2002).

12. The first set of questionnaires in the smaller-scale survey, which were longer and more qualitative in nature than the version used in the larger study, produced much by way of interesting written material from interviewees, and where the occasional comment is quoted from these it is referenced with the letter L followed by the questionnaire number. They have, however, not been thoroughly analysed or included in the statistical analyses presented below. Discerning readers will be aware that a note of unscientificity has crept in with the use of the words ‘approximately’ and

this second set of questionnaires were both returned and usable, in the sense that sufficient data was present for them to be coded for most purposes; given my research interest in generational differences, the year of birth was in all cases essential, although it was possible to make use of questionnaires where at least a few other questions were left blank. Since the research project was explicitly based in a UK university and funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, a fact prominently highlighted alongside the UCL logo on the front cover of the questionnaires, there was no issue of an in-built 'West German / East German' inequality or suspicion as far as the East German respondents were concerned, many of whom expressed some weariness and cynicism about what they saw as typical West German views on the GDR. Nevertheless, and although every effort was made (following a small pilot study of questionnaires for the larger survey) to phrase questions in an open and relatively neutral way, allowing people to give their own views without being unnecessarily 'led' in any particular direction, many respondents commented that they felt the questionnaire had an in-built bias against the GDR; this might partly reflect a wider somewhat defensive stance among many East Germans accompanied by generally rather critical reactions to western representations of the GDR in the media.

This survey, though relatively small by comparison with the activities of professional bodies such as the Allensbach Institut für Demoskopie, made it possible to combine quantitative and qualitative questions, the latter giving respondents scope for presenting in their own language and conceptual framework what they themselves wanted to say about their

'around'. Despite rigorous statistical intentions at the stage of research design, there were a number of amendments during the implementation phase. We came to the view, for example, that to achieve a satisfactory response rate among older cohorts, it was preferable to allow administration of the questionnaire by a senior person or carer in a relaxed setting, giving elderly people sufficient time to make their responses; many such questionnaires were photocopied by the institution and then subsequently returned by post. We also adopted a 'snowball technique' in workplaces (such as a copy shop) where staff did not want to take the time to fill in the questionnaire on the spot, but distributed it among colleagues who sent it back later from home. As in any survey, some people who were approached simply refused, both for the kinds of reasons which are the common experience of street survey research everywhere (in haste to get home, to get to work, to meet friends, to catch a train; suspicion of survey research, or people accosting them in the street; not wanting to 'get involved' or have one's privacy invaded) as well as some which seem more GDR-specific, particularly perhaps fear of being potentially exposed to adverse consequences as a result of admitting to particular viewpoints or former political activities. Since we have no means of knowing precisely how many were distributed that did not come back by post, and by definition those who refused to participate are unknown quantities, it is impossible to speculate usefully about the ways in which those who filled in the questionnaire might have systematically differed from those who did not. Nevertheless, the fact that the social profile in terms of patterns of employment and rates of unemployment is fairly representative of the East German population as a whole at the time gives some grounds for belief in the more general validity of these findings.

lives. It was also possible to view individuals ‘as a whole’, in their different areas of activity at different times in their lives, rather than merely statistical fodder for attitudes on single issues. The corresponding challenge, however, was in analysis; often the material in answers to open-ended questions was both fascinating and extremely hard to code in any sensible way to render it susceptible to meaningful statistical analysis.¹³

There are considerable difficulties with trying to obtain a representative cross-section of the former GDR population in terms of social structure, given the enormous changes in the socio-economic system since 1990. No simple glancing at visible dress codes, as might be possible for a survey of British attitudes in a central London street, will give the interviewer ready clues as to a person’s position in the East German class structure pre–and post–1990. In the event, geographical location was taken as a poor proxy for ensuring a degree of social distribution. The questionnaires were distributed in several distinctive locations in eastern Germany: in Eisenhüttenstadt (originally named StalinStadt), once a flagship ‘socialist new town’ on the border with Poland at the Oder river; in Königswusterhausen, a small old township (and former royal hunting lodge of the Hohenzollern dynasty) at the end of the S-Bahn line southeast of Berlin; in the Müggelsee/Köpenick area of southeastern Berlin, a relatively pleasant area of old lakeside villas as well as newer housing estates; Marzahn, a northern part of East Berlin characterised by a high proportion of ‘Plattenbau’ housing estates of high-rise prefabricated apartment blocks built during GDR times, with relatively high rates of unemployment, poverty, and social distress in unified Germany; and in the Lichtenberg area of East Berlin, with a somewhat higher proportion of older housing stock as well as newer estates, and historically perhaps most notable for the presence of the Normannenstrasse complex in which Erich Mielke presided over the headquarters of the Ministry for State Security (*Stasi*), and in which a high proportion of *Stasi* officials lived with their families.

Many of the respondents were interviewed and were prepared to fill out the questionnaire in public spaces: in parks, at playgrounds, while out shopping, at leisure activities or cultural events, on their way home from work, and even in some cases while at work. At the time of the survey, between

13. Statistics must, of course, always be treated with the relevant degree of scepticism (to quote the title of one textbook, there are ‘lies, damned lies and statistics’; or, in the parlance of one statistics course with reference to highly sophisticated computer packages, there is always the danger of ‘rubbish in, rubbish out’). Much depends on how questions are phrased, concepts operationalised, answers coded. If treated carefully, statistics can nevertheless in some respects be highly suggestive for historians, highlighting issues that require more extensive qualitative research and reflection. It is in this spirit that the results of this study are reported here.

Table 13.1. Interview Locations

	Frequency	Percent
Königswusterhausen	8	3.0
Eisenhüttenstadt	54	19.9
Lichtenberg	22	8.1
Marzahn (general)	44	16.2
Müggelsee / Müggelheim	36	13.3
Treptow-Köpenick (Arbeitsamt)	14	5.2
Friedrichshagen, Seniorenfreizeitstätte	23	8.5
VITAL		
Marzahn (Arbeitsamt)	12	4.4
Lichtenberg (Arbeitsamt)	13	4.8
Other locations	45	16.6
Total	271	100.0

18.2 percent and 18.9 percent of East Germans of working age were unemployed.¹⁴ Given this high unemployment rate, a total of 14.4 percent of the sample were interviewed while waiting in job centres or unemployment offices (*Arbeitsämter*).¹⁵ Older people were often accessed through day care centres, or residential old people's homes. Some questionnaires were distributed on a 'snowball' basis through personal contacts in a particular workplace, senior citizens' day care centre, church or leisure facility, and subsequently returned by post. While a rough attempt was made to balance the gender ratio, in the event more females responded (169) than males (102).

What follows is an account of some of the key findings of this specific piece of research; to explore these findings further would require embedding in a more extensive analysis of changing experiences and perceptions among different groups across the whole of Germany's turbulent twentieth century, and dense contextualisation in the light of appropriate archival materials.¹⁶

14. Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland, at <http://www.destatis.de/indicators/d/arb230ad.htm>.

15. To be absolutely precise: just under two-thirds (63.8 percent) of the sample were of working age (born 1940–1977); so the total percentage unemployed within the sample was actually 22.54 percent of those of working age, very slightly higher than the average for the area. However, unemployment rates among males aged over twenty ranged from 20 percent to 21.5 percent and among females aged over twenty from 20.3 percent to 22.7 percent during the relevant months, whereas unemployment rates for young people aged under twenty were much lower (from 7.6 percent to 14.5 percent), bringing down the overall averages. Since there were no individuals in the sample aged below twenty (the youngest being 29), the unemployment rate in the sample corresponded very closely to the average for the working population of that age group in the region.

16. This constitutes a far more extensive project, using not merely oral history interviews, but also a wide range of 'ego-documents' and other archival material from across the century. I am extremely grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for a Major Research Fellowship, making this much broader project possible.

Significant Differences: The ‘Sore Thumb’ Theory of Generations

Striking to any informed observer of the GDR is the large number of prominent people who seemed—like the internationally acclaimed writer Christa Wolf—to have been born in or around 1929. An analysis of those who made a sufficient contribution to the life of the GDR to have been included in the retrospective ‘Who was Who in the GDR’ (*Wer war wer in der DDR*)—whether by virtue of their activities as functionaries, politicians, senior members of the *Stasi* hierarchy, or as writers, musicians, actors, visual artists, theologians, clowns, sportspeople, oppositionalists—reveals a striking preponderance of functionaries and staunch upholders of the regime among those born in the period 1926–1932.¹⁷ If the ‘founding fathers’ of the GDR were figures born before the First World War, members of the internally highly divided ‘Front generation’ and the ‘War youth generation’ (*Kriegsjugendgeneration*), the GDR was effectively ‘carried’ by this ‘second Hitler Youth generation’. In between was a very different group: the cohort of those born during and shortly after the First World War, the ‘first Hitler Youth generation’ who, as young people in the 1930s, were the most enthusiastic supporters of the Nazi regime, and who—at least the males among them—were disproportionately decimated by participation in the Second World War.¹⁸ The ‘sore thumb’ of the group that might loosely be called the ‘1929ers’—the extraordinary ‘sticking out’ of a significant cluster of several hundred people born within a few years of each other, between 1926 and 1932—certainly requires further exploration, whether or not they claimed any sense of self-awareness as a generation both ‘in and for itself’ in Karl Mannheim’s sense.¹⁹

It would at first appear, on a hard-nosed demographic analysis, that a combination of differential birth rates in the early decades of the twentieth century, disproportionate survival rates through the Second World War, and

17. See, for further details of this analysis of functional elites and birth cohorts, Mary Fulbrook, ‘Generationen und Kohorten in der DDR. Protagonisten und Widersacher des DDR-Systems aus der Perspektive biographischer Daten’ in Annegret Schüle, Thomas Ahbe and Rainer Gries, eds., *Die DDR aus generationengeschichtlicher Perspektive. Eine Inventur* (Universitätsverlag Leipzig, 2005).

18. See for a preliminary discussion of this, Mary Fulbrook, ‘Changing states, changing selves: Violence and social generations in the transition from Nazism to Communism’ in Fulbrook, ed., *Uncivilising Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Culture and Society: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

19. Karl Mannheim, ‘Das Problem der Generationen’, in Mannheim, *Wissenssoziologie* (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1964; orig. 1928), pp. 509–65; and contributions to Mark Roseman, ed., *Generations in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Dorothee Wierling’s chapter, above, on the differences between the ‘1929ers’ and the ‘1949ers’.

age at 'entry' into the GDR and associated opportunities for political advancement, together could explain these rather startling findings: those who had survived Hitler's war, and who were in their late teens or early twenties in 1949, were far less likely to be tarnished by the taint of Nazism than those in their thirties who had held positions in the SS, the SA, the Nazi system of government, or who had participated as 'ordinary men' in the racist and ideological war against 'Bolshevism', brutally exterminating communist 'partisans' and Jews on the eastern front.²⁰ Younger people without such a background—however radical the 'conversion' as a POW might have been in some cases of older men—were, accordingly, far more likely after the war to have been taken on, for example, as 'new teachers' (*Neulehrer*), or vaulted rapidly up the emerging political and functional hierarchies of the communist 'anti-fascist state' after 1949. On this sort of structural explanation, too, one could argue that the relatively low participation in positions of power and authority in the GDR of those born from 1933 onwards could be explained by some form of 'closure', as key positions were already filled by those young enough to retain their status throughout the existence of the GDR as a state, approaching retirement age in their sixties only with the collapse of the GDR itself in 1989.

Thus, as far as the curious preponderance of '1929ers' among the functional classes of the GDR is concerned, a purely structural argument could be run along the following lines: the differential presence of those born in the later 1920s and early 1930s among the state-sustaining groups in the GDR could be explained by the differential birth rates and survival rates of succeeding birth cohorts in and through the two World Wars, combined with differential post-war opportunity structures with respect to the likelihood of being appointed to and retaining a position of political significance in the new communist regime.

Such a purely structural and statistical analysis works, up to a point, particularly with respect to comparisons between those born during or shortly after the First World War and those born in the later Weimar years; it does not, however (for reasons which cannot be discussed fully here), explain key differences between the '1929ers' and those born in the peacetime years of the 1930s with respect to their later positions in and attitudes towards the GDR. In particular, given the high turnover of functionaries particularly in the first decade or so of the GDR's existence, and the fact that over three million people fled to the West while the border was still permeable, among them many *Neulehrer* and others in promising positions who nevertheless felt

20. The long-term effects on particular cohorts have yet to be fully explored.

they would have better career prospects in the West, the theory of ‘closure’ in the opportunity structure for those born in the 1930s simply does not hold (although there is undoubtedly some mileage in this when we consider social mobility for younger cohorts of the ‘FDJ generation’ who reached adulthood in the 1970s and 1980s).²¹ It would seem there must have been some attitudinal obstacles to similar forms of active positive participation in the East German functionary system on the part of these slightly younger East Germans.

This raises therefore a number of questions about how people themselves perceived these experiences, and why they were willing—or not, as the case may be—to adopt new roles and play according to the rules of a regime very different from the one in which they had been socialised. And, focusing only on the select group of those whose actions earned them a place in *Wer war wer in der DDR*, it also raises the question of whether those who were willing to take on high-level functionary positions were in any sense representative of their birth cohorts, or were a group apart, distinctively different in key respects from other members of the broader age cohort in the society from which they had emerged. Were they, in effect, a totally atypical ‘generational unit’ (*Generationseinheit*, to use Mannheim’s terminology), rising to prominence by virtue of their differences from others? Or, did those who rose to the top in GDR society and politics in some respects reflect wider attributes of their birth cohort or ‘social generation’? And if so, what were these distinctive characteristics, and why were they characteristic of precisely this cohort and not of preceding and succeeding cohorts?

The survey carried out in 2005 of a wider cross-section of ‘ordinary’ East Germans of different birth cohorts provides some startling preliminary descriptive answers to these questions, and is highly suggestive in a variety of ways, even if the material falls short of suggesting any kind of explanation. To summarise the most important findings: those ‘sore thumb’ members of the ‘second Hitler Youth generation’ or ‘1929ers’ who rose to prominent positions in the GDR appear to have been far more similar to ‘ordinary’ members of their cohort than one might have thought possible. And they seem to be sharply different from those born just a few years later, members of the cohorts born during the Third Reich.

There are many ways of chopping the statistics to represent these differences; but whichever way one chooses to analyse the data and group specific birth cohorts, the peculiarities surrounding the ‘1929ers’ are visible

21. See also the discussion in Ralph Jessen, ‘Mobility and blockages in the 1970s’, in Konrad Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999).

and striking. In this survey, ‘1929ers’—i.e., those born between 1926 and 1932—were much more likely to have been a member of the SED than were any other birth cohorts before or afterwards. For all other cohorts, membership of the SED ranged between 11.1 percent and 16.7 percent of the sample in the respective cohort. But among those in the sample who were born between the mid 1920s and Hitler’s accession to power, a staggering 41.4 percent professed to have been members of the SED—around three times as many, on average, as for all the other cohorts. The association between birth cohort and SED membership is even stronger if one selects only males: as many as 70 percent of the males in this cohort of the ‘second Hitler Youth generation’ claimed to have been members of the SED; and this was the only cohort in which those who had been members vastly outweighed those who had not.

The 1929ers were not merely, it seems, far more likely to be committed Communists; they were also far more likely to be ‘either-or’ people, rejecting Christianity on a massive scale, in stark contrast to those born shortly after them. Those born in the immediately following years—the years of the Third Reich—were, by contrast, far more likely to have been and, more importantly, to have remained Christians: virtually half of the Christians in the entire sample (33 out of 67) were born during these twelve years out of the total of sixty years of birth cohorts. Those born in the Third Reich, unlike those born in the immediately preceding years (who had also been born at a time when belonging to a particular religious confession was well-nigh automatic), retained their church membership throughout the rather anti-religious years of the atheist GDR, when to be a Christian brought with it disadvantages in terms not only of one’s own career, but also the school experiences, educational opportunities, and life prospects of one’s children.²² These committed Christians of the Third Reich generation were joined by a small but significant group of young people, born in the 1960s, for whom the church became an important haven for free discussion of political and moral problems during the 1980s.²³ The experience of Christianity of these younger people, following the meeting between Erich Honecker and church leaders culminating in the Church-state agreement of March 1978, was that the church allowed them both metaphorical and physical space to discuss openly the urgent problems of the day—human rights, peace, the environment. While in the earlier twentieth century female religiosity appears to

22. On religion in the GDR, see for example Robert Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

23. Cf. my discussion in M. Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

have had a strong impact on political position (as demonstrated, for example, in female voting preferences in the Weimar Republic), there was no significant relationship between gender and religion in this sample of former citizens of the GDR. In some respects, this makes the sharp differences with respect to generation even more interesting.

Those old enough to remember clearly a time before the GDR not only had quite distinctive profiles with respect to their perceptions of and participation in the GDR; but particular birth cohorts also differed somewhat from one another with respect to their experiences of and in the Third Reich. Some had been old enough to fight; others had been merely youngsters or children; all had been quite strongly exposed to socialisation within a period dominated by Nazi ideology. It is therefore all the more striking that such children of an 'age of ideology' should have departed from the dominant ideology of the period of their upbringing in such patterned and divergent ways. It is also striking that the 'sore thumb' generational group of loyal GDR supporters appears to run from the birth cohorts of 1925 to 1932, straddling the key year of 1929, which was the cut-off point for the unlucky cohort who experienced compulsory membership of the Hitler Youth organisations at the age of ten in 1939, and participation in military service at the age of sixteen in 1945. There is more that requires explanation here than the notion of the '*Flakhelfer* generation' (the generation of those who as youngsters were just old enough at the end of the war to see military service assisting in anti-aircraft posts) can provide—and indeed far more than can be discussed here.²⁴

It is worth considering briefly the ways in which members of these cohorts themselves sought to portray their experiences of the war's end and the subsequent East German regime, in the light of the current (2005) experiences of united Germany. Very large numbers had extremely negative end of war experiences: treks, fleeing their *Heimat*, Russians raping their mothers or other women in their immediate environment, witnessing many dead people; loss of their fathers either in the war or through illness and harsh treatment while subsequently held as a Prisoner of War. Relatively few mention what might be classed as 'political' or anti-Hitler comments (let alone unqualified pro-Nazi comments), although there are passing critical mentions, for example, of youngsters being sent out to 'defend' their village, or seeing dead young boys in the street when emerging from the safety of the cellar.²⁵

24. To explore adequately the issue of generation formation in relation to diverse war experiences would require far more extensive exploration of contemporary sources than is possible in the context of this essay, where discussion has to be confined merely to the ways in which people sought to represent their experiences decades later.

25. See for example QN 250, female, born 1935.

Quite a few claim to have had experiences as children of kindly treatment by Russians, experiences which are probably not purely imagined figments constructed through the lens of later GDR propaganda; for example, 'The Russians treated us children well and protected us, even though we were all frightened'²⁶; 'I was a child and had no bad experiences; [The Russians] were nice to me and friendly'.²⁷ One remembered 'refugees on the streets—prisoners dead, died of starvation on the road—we children helped to put up notes for [people searching for] relatives, and to distribute warm food—many people shot themselves out of fear of the Russians . . . For me the first meetings with Russians were pleasant, friendly.'²⁸ These striking experiences and fleeting 'memories' are of course couched in the terms of over half a century later, and are less a record of 'what actually happened' than of the ways in which former East Germans today want selectively and discursively to represent their pasts. What is particularly interesting here, however, is the way in which these 'memories' or 'claimed experiences' of the war's end are then embedded into the narrative of their new lives in the GDR.

A remarkably high number of members of these cohorts see the GDR as having given them good or new life chances (discussed in more detail below); they present themselves as being grateful to the GDR for the degree of security and happiness it eventually provided for them, following the immediate post-war years of misery and hunger. Many were initially relieved that the violence of war had ended, but devastated and uncertain about how to pick up the pieces after the collapse of Hitler's Reich. Yet by the early 1950s, the shapes of new lives—in terms of both work and family—began to emerge; a degree of political commitment often followed, in a fashion. The official East German term, 'Aufbau' (not so much 'reconstruction' as 'building up anew'), often appears quite unselfconsciously and frequently in these vignettes. Again, even though this is only a matter of linguistic socialisation, reflecting nearly half a century of living within a language community in which this term was regularly used, it is significant that respondents did in fact use it so readily.

Innumerable examples could be given: a few stories must suffice here. One woman, born in 1922, comments on 'shattering' experiences at the end of the war, such as witnessing a column of concentration camp prisoners

26. QN 60, female, born 1934. These kinds of comments are also very much in line with the findings of Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), who emphasises that while the Russians raped German women wildly and robbed adults indiscriminately for their watches, wallets, bicycles, and much else, they remained kindly towards children.

27. QN 163, female, born 1934.

28. QN 161, female, born 1938.

on the way through her village on one of the ‘death marches’; but after that, ‘life in the little village was very quickly normalised’ (*normalisierte sich . . . sehr schnell*).²⁹ At first, her mother was suicidal, ‘since we stood before the abyss’; but her father prevented this. ‘And then, two years later when I started having success in the theatre, and got married, . . . [I realised] that one should never give up hope, there is always a silver lining on the horizon.’ This woman, who worked for many years in the DEFA film studio as well as with children’s theatre, developed a particularly lengthy, complex yet generally positive evaluation of the strengths and weakness of the GDR. Another woman, born in 1923, remembered that:

I experienced the end of the war in Saxony, when the ‘eastern workers’ [*Ost-arbeiter*] were liberated and ran around the streets, happy. At that time I was ‘unhappy’ about having lost the war. But then a process of re-thinking began. There must never again be war. I very much hope that my future descendents will experience true Socialism.³⁰

A male born in 1924 was active as a soldier in Italy during the war, and was taken into British and American custody in 1943; the ‘best years’ of his life were ‘before 1943’, and the ‘worst years’ during his three-year imprisonment from 1943 to 1946. But he rapidly picked up the pieces in East Germany after his return, claiming that it gave him ‘new chances’ in the following terms: ‘further professional qualifications, no existential fears. Order and security reigned.’³¹ He married in 1948, and had at the time of the survey enjoyed ‘nearly 57 years of happy marriage and well brought-up children’; his family had been the principal source of happiness in his life. He joined the SED in 1959, and was also a member of the FDGB and the DSF (German-Soviet Friendship Society), as well as being a volunteer in the fire service. A woman born in 1925 provided a lengthy and graphic account of her flight from East Prussia, as one of 3,000 refugees on a boat to Rostock, on a three-day journey remembered principally in terms of constant hunger and fear of death through aircraft bombing or mines.³² Settled in appalling conditions in a Mecklenburg village, this woman, then aged twenty, experienced the end of the war as a massive ‘blow of fate’ (*Schicksalsschlag*): ‘The “Final Victory” (*Endsieg*) which we had been promised was now history’. The immediate post-war period was recounted in terms of a very high death rate exacerbated by hunger, typhus,

29. QN 254, female, born 1922.

30. QN 44, female, born 1923.

31. QN 165, male, born 1924. (‘Berufliche Weiterqualifizierung, keine Existenzängste. Es herrschte Ordnung und Sicherheit.’)

32. QN 159, female, born 1925.

and other diseases, rapes by Russian soldiers being 'a daily occurrence' (*an der Tagesordnung*); she too was affected by disease and 'battled with death'. In November 1945, the family resettled in the southern part of the Soviet zone, and in 1952, on marriage, she herself moved with her new husband to Berlin. Then began the story of her 'happy' life: recounted in terms of enjoyment of work in the GDR, which gave her new opportunities as an employee in housing administration in the 1950s, with interesting and many-faceted work, as well as work colleagues with whom she still kept up contacts, and later, in the 1970s, retraining as a Kindergarten worker and a salesperson; as well as fifty years of an extremely happy marriage, a son who 'brought us much happiness, is upright (*gradlinig*) and successful in his profession [and] whose well-functioning marriage has now also lasted nearly 25 years . . . [M]y dear grandson has successfully passed his *Abitur*'. This woman became a member of one of the GDR's bloc parties, the LDPD (Liberal Democratic Party), in 1949, a membership she retained throughout the GDR's existence, as well as joining the DFD (Democratic Women's League) in 1958. On somewhat similar lines, a woman born in 1931 reported that:

I experienced the end of the war as a thirteen-year-old in the former East Prussia with all the horrors of the Second World War. Expulsion in 1947 out of homeland [*Heimat*]. Resettling [*Übersiedlung*] with very ill mother into the former GDR. Father died after being transported in April 1945 to Siberia. Then as a seventeen-year-old, all alone and without any means of support, survived a very difficult time.

After marriage in 1951 and the birth of a son a new life began. We were happy and also contented with our life.³³

The very language of this particular account—with the use of the first person pronoun omitted in the note form used for the most difficult years, then reappearing suddenly with the 'new life'—seems to reflect the way in which life opened up to agency again with the 'normalisation' of the new family in the 1950s.

These sorts of life stories could be multiplied by many other examples: there was a 'normal' pattern to the lives of those who felt in 1945 that their world had been devastated, but then managed as young adults in the 1950s to pick up the pieces and enter into fulfilling relationships with marriage partners, benefit from new training opportunities, and embark on employment in a society in which work and basic security of existence, if not the risky and unevenly distributed affluence of the West, were guaranteed to all who made the minimum

33. QN 43, female, born 1931.

commitments required of them. A significant number of young adults who were not prepared to make such commitments left for the West in the 1950s. Aspects of life and work in the GDR were, then, subsequently experienced in rather different ways by members of the older cohorts who had remained, and those who had little choice, having been ‘born into’ the GDR. Yet there were, too, common overriding experiences of life for those who remained in the GDR after 1961 and experienced ‘actually existing socialism’ as it developed over time, as becomes evident if we consider selected aspects in a little more detail.

The Primacy of the Personal? Best Times, Worst Times

The ‘private’ is definitely ‘political’, especially in ‘abnormal times’. In times of war, millions of personal relationships are ruptured, damaged, destroyed forever—through death, disfigurement, and disability, physical dislocation, psychological damage from which individuals never ‘return’ to their former ‘selves’. In post-war periods, people may interpret the reformation of personal bonds, the reunion or reconstitution of families, as ‘normalisation’. Especially if all else appears to be ‘returning to normal’—food supplies improve, communication networks are repaired, physical war damage is dealt with, and new buildings rise on the site of ruins—then a process of ‘normalisation’ appears to be clearly identifiable. This certainly seems to have been the case in West Germany in the 1950s, where a determination to ‘kick over the traces’ was also associated with a wilful putting of the Nazi past behind them.³⁴

In the GDR, there was initially a period of very radical social upheaval associated at least in part with claims about denazification: expropriation of large estates and of significant sectors of finance and industry was to some degree ‘legitimated’ by theories of ‘fascism’ as being rooted in ‘monopoly capitalism’ and ‘imperialism’ carried by capitalists, militarists, and the landowning Junker class; the radical turnover of personnel in the teaching and legal professions and in local administration (unlike in the West) was further legitimised by theories of denazification, even if the ultimate goal was to strengthen communist control over the Soviet occupation zone and subsequent GDR. Many of those adversely affected by this radical social upheaval—whose estates and property had been confiscated, whose professional careers were terminated or blighted, or whose children faced bleak prospects—fled West, as did many of those who had only briefly settled on the soil of the Soviet Zone as ‘refugees and expellees’ from lost German territories further east. Before the building of the Berlin Wall, around one-sixth of the East German population left in this way. For

34. See the discussion in Chapter 1, above.

those who remained, the issue of the Nazi past was by and large disposed of, through the convenient myth of the 'anti-fascist state' which pronounced the ordinary 'workers and peasants' effectively innocent. To this extent, at least, Germans in the East had perhaps even less need to worry about their Nazi past than their fellow former comrades of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, who had so recently been converted to democracy in the West. Yet, at first glance, there were other things they would need to worry about more, which might, one would think, militate against any early sense of 'normalisation'.

With the lack of any injection of Marshall Aid along the lines experienced in the West, and the difficulties of a war-torn economy further disrupted by reparations to the Soviet Union and radical socio-economic upheaval, in East Germany the outward signs of a post-war society stubbornly resisted removal. Buildings remained ruined, the pock-marks of war damage disfigured older houses and offices right through the next forty years; the post-war economy, while relatively successful in Soviet bloc terms, never quite took off in a manner comparable to the West German 'economic miracle'; and, after a faltering moment of new hopes in the early 1970s, an inexorable slide began into economic decline and eventual near bankruptcy by the end of the 1980s, evident to any casual observer in the high levels of air pollution, rusting industrial landscapes, ill-stocked ordinary shops (in contrast to Intershops offering luxury goods for western currency), dilapidated older housing stock, and un-repaired roads. Despite the high value accorded to work, the system simply was not working; difficulties of supply of materials and spare parts led to constant frustration, while a second 'under the counter' economy was the only way of fulfilling many needs. Politics remained a matter of repression and effective incarceration, infamously symbolised by the Wall. Post-war division and the GDR's status as a separate sovereign state remained contentious, even after the international recognition of the GDR consequent on *Ostpolitik*; and most East Germans remained highly aware of the existence of another, more affluent Germany—an awareness and interest which was not reciprocated by their West German brethren, who generally showed little interest in the GDR. In short, for most East Germans, the outer parameters of life might be regarded as sufficiently uncomfortable that, from a western perspective, they could or should never have been ignored. This is in part what makes it so difficult for western observers to accept that the notion of normalisation could ever be applied to the GDR, except, perhaps, in the politically highly contentious sense adopted by other Soviet bloc states to refer to periods of enforced stabilisation following suppression of challenges to Soviet hegemony.³⁵

35. See Chapter 1, above. See also Mark Allinson's discussion, in Chapter 12, of the intrinsic instabilities of the GDR's 'most normal year', prior to its terminal decline.

Table 13.2. The extent to which respondents agreed with the statement that it was possible to lead a 'perfectly normal life in the GDR'¹

	Strongly disagree	Partly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly agree	Strongly agree
1917–24	11	0	16.7	22.2	50
1925–32	7.1	3.6	10.7	35.7	39.3
1933–45	8.5	6.1	20.7	34.1	24.4
1946–57	2.1	6.3	29.7	29.2	29.2
1958–69	4.2	1.4	28.2	46.5	19.7
1970–79	5.3	0	26.3	31.6	36.8

¹ By percentage of each cohort, omitting non-responses.

And yet: when we look at the evidence of this survey, we have to recognise that there are distinctions to be made. When questioned in 2005, remarkably few respondents—only around 10 percent in total—'strongly' or 'partly' disagreed with the statement that it was possible to lead 'a perfectly normal life' in the GDR; but again, there are some interesting generational variations (see Table 13.2), which give pause for thought.

Both strength of agreement and strength of disagreement are significantly stronger, relative to the cohort, among the older respondents in the survey than among those 'born into' the GDR. The 'first Hitler youth generation'—those who as adults either resisted or sustained the Third Reich—are by far the most polarised in their views about the Communist regime that succeeded Nazi Germany. The children of the Third Reich, born between 1933 and 1945, were most likely to disagree with the view that it was possible to live a perfectly normal life in the GDR, with a total of 14.6 percent disagreeing strongly or somewhat, compared to 8.4 percent of those born in the years after the end of the war when the border to the West was still porous, and a mere 5.6 percent or 5.3 percent of the two younger cohorts born from the later 1950s through to the 1970s, who had grown up entirely within the GDR and had known nothing else with which to compare it during the period of their socialisation. Those born just before and after the building of the Berlin Wall are distinctive, however, in that they seem to have hedged their bets most with respect to both ends of the spectrum of answers; as many as three quarters of this cohort (74.7 percent) gave the rather cautious responses of 'neither agree nor disagree', or 'partly agree', with again the lowest percentage of all, 19.7 percent, prepared to agree strongly with the statement concerning the possibility of 'normal lives'. If the 'first Hitler youth generation' was strongly polarised, with nearly two thirds agreeing or disagreeing strongly, then this 'Wall generation' appears

to have preferred, perhaps appropriately, to sit on the fence, clustering in a somewhat non-committal middle, with less than a quarter prepared to give 'extreme' answers.

How can these subjective viewpoints be explained; and in what relevant sets of associations, connections, values, or general evaluations of the kinds of lives they led in the GDR are such assertions of relative 'normality' rooted? Of crucial importance is the question of what really mattered to people. And, on this point, there is no doubt whatsoever: of whatever generation, gender or class background, what mattered most to most people most of the time was their 'personal' life. And although the 'personal' is not a matter to be abstracted from 'politics', and is indeed deeply and intensely affected by the historical events and social and political structures through which people make their lives and by which their lives are shaped, it is not necessarily always interpreted or experienced in this way. It is often only in hindsight that people recognise just how much their lives were shaped by a particular set of historical circumstances, and social and economic parameters. It is this recognition that becomes very evident in reading through the evidence of retrospective perceptions.

Here, a very interesting finding emerges from the survey: there is a marked asymmetry between what actively makes people happy, and what makes them unhappy. Lack of that which makes one unhappy is not necessarily sufficient to make one happy; whereas disruption in what makes one happy is sufficient to make one unhappy. Economic insecurity is a deep cause of unhappiness, but lack of it does not necessarily actively make one happy; it is merely a precondition for other possibilities in life. Personal fulfilment in love, family, and work are what tend to make people actively happy.

These questions were approached in a number of ways, none of them methodologically very satisfactory as far as producing easily quantifiable data was concerned, but extremely suggestive and interesting in relation to the qualitative questions of subjective experience. Open-ended questions on the following lines were posed: 'When were the "best times" in your life? And why?'; 'When were the "worst times" in your life? And why?'; and 'What was your greatest pleasure in life? What made you happy?' (In the light of these questions, it seems hard to uphold the complaint on the part of some respondents that the questionnaire was entirely phrased in gloomy, anti-GDR terms designed to elicit critiques.) The questions were phrased in this open-ended way precisely to elicit free responses from people, to see what they would come up with spontaneously, and in what kind of terminology they would use to describe their experiences.

The asymmetry referred to above lies in the following combination of findings. The overwhelmingly most important factor in 'happiness' for the majority

of respondents consisted in personal relationships, family, partner, children, friends; and, for a significant percentage of these—particularly women who came to maturity in the GDR—in the further fulfilment that arises from being able to combine enjoyment of family and friends with personal satisfaction in work or profession (the notion of ‘career’ appears, by contrast, quite alien to the majority of East Germans and was not used at all by these respondents). Very small numbers indeed gave other responses to the ‘what makes you happy?’ question. A couple of responses to the question of ‘What made you happy?’ may be taken to stand for many more on similar lines: ‘My marriage, my children, my work, travelling abroad in socialist countries, my house, my garden, my family’.³⁶ ‘My husband, regulated work times, no fears about losing my job, many friends, affordable leisure—which is not the case today, for example I was a member of a sailing club (costing 1.30 Marks a month) and after the *Wende* the cost went up to 125.00 Marks and the club eventually had to be disbanded. From today’s perspective, I would probably have liked to go to Austria, for example, but at that time I didn’t miss it; what you don’t know about you don’t miss.’³⁷ ‘Best times’ also correspond in a very large numbers of cases—again somewhat more so among women than men—with purely ‘personal’ factors, such as periods of childhood and youth that in retrospect appear carefree and happy, falling in love and marriage, the birth of a child, family holidays, as well as with periods of fulfilment in work and professional life.

‘Worst times’ inevitably also include a significant number of purely ‘personal’ moments: the illness or death of a loved one, difficulty in relationships, separation or divorce. But ‘worst times’, across generational and gender divides, are far more likely to correlate with periods of political and economic insecurity and the acute existential anxiety caused by major historical upheavals, which have the potential to translate major historical events into personally experienced tragedies. The two great ‘winners’, as far as the ‘worst times’ were concerned, were, paradoxically: first, the immediate post-war years of the later 1940s and very early 1950s (among those old enough to remember this period—and note that it was generally not the war years, but rather the post-war years, which were the ‘worst times’); and secondly, the period since unification in 1990 up to the time of the survey in 2005, which was the ‘worst time’ in their life for by far the largest group of respondents. Both of these periods were times of widespread extreme anxiety about sheer physical survival. Hunger and the memory of hunger, as well as the experience of being physically uprooted, moving, losing close relatives, worrying about how to survive, how to start a new life, loomed very large in the reports of the post-war period; loss

36. QN 216, female, born 1939.

37. QN 246, female, born 1943.

of employment, continued unemployment, worries about being able to pay the rent, lack of medical care, prospects for one's own future, or that of children and grandchildren, depending on age, loomed very large in the reports of those identifying the 'worst times' as being in the period since 1990. Thus, economic insecurity and '*Existenzängste*' are major causes of unhappiness; but, in itself, lack of economic insecurity is not, apparently, a major cause of positive happiness in the same way as are personal relationships or the combination of fulfilment in family and work.

What people most valued about the GDR in retrospect, therefore, was the possibility of combining personal happiness in their family life with security of employment and an income sufficient to meet basic needs. (Freud appears to have been posthumously vindicated in his emphasis on the importance to individual well-being of love and work.) Many respondents claimed in retrospect that economic and consumer shortages in the GDR were relatively unimportant, or had relatively low salience for them, as compared with the good life chances they enjoyed, the possibility of studying for free, or having a fulfilling professional life; this sort of comment was particularly noticeable among those who could be classed as members of the East German intelligentsia who had come from working class backgrounds, giving some support to the widespread thesis that those who had enjoyed rapid upward social mobility in the 1950s and 1960s 'had a stake in the system' and were appropriately grateful to it for the life chances it had offered them.

The Active Self: Life Chances, Work, and Community

A distinctive value system appears to have become well established, which included not only the high value accorded to and satisfaction derived from work (continuing in some respects with pre-Nazi traditions, but extended in a variety of ways, particularly with respect to women), but also the importance of notions of 'togetherness' (or a sense of *Gemeinschaft*, in contrast to the individualistic *Gesellschaft* of the capitalist 'elbow society'), despite marked tendencies towards 'individualisation' in the growing consumer society of the later decades.

In contrast to western notions of competitive individualism, in which the fruits of inherited capital—whether material or cultural—are often interpreted as the results of individual effort and merit, the GDR was based on a strong official sense of community responsibility. On the one hand, this meant, in official terms, that the 'collective' should be placed above the 'individual'; and that working for a better collective future was to be prioritised over 'bourgeois' notions of individual happiness and personal fulfilment. It also meant that the

previously privileged classes were demoted, and displaced, while the previously under-privileged workers and peasants—so long as they were of an acceptable political persuasion—were supported and promoted, at least in the first two decades of ‘social revolution’ after the war. While this process was extremely uncomfortable (to say the least) for those who were in the process expropriated and discriminated against, for others it meant that they perceived the GDR as having genuinely offered them new, or good, chances in life, of a quality that they would not have expected given their own relatively modest social backgrounds. It was then possible, in the eyes of a surprising and significant majority of those questioned, not merely to lead a ‘perfectly normal life’, but even to lead a ‘good’ life in the GDR. A remarkable number felt that the GDR had given them ‘good’ or ‘new’ life chances (depending on their age at ‘entry’ into the GDR—whether as a young person with memories of what had gone before, or whether effectively born into the GDR)—or, to phrase it more accurately, remarkably few disagreed either partly or strongly with this statement.

Significant generational differences in response, however, again suggest the importance of different life experiences and points of comparison in evaluating what was ‘objectively’ the ‘same’ situation as far as the outward appearance conveyed by an ‘objective’ historical representation is concerned. The cohorts most likely to feel that the GDR had given them good chances in life were, proportionately, the older ones: those born before 1945, and, particularly striking, those born before 1925. Those ‘born into’ the GDR, by contrast, were less enthusiastic about what the GDR had offered them; perhaps because their experience was compared to the West, rather than to expectations rooted in a pre-1945 past; or perhaps because they had had little or no choice about being in the system. Among the older cohorts, in addition to having ‘objectively’ benefited from the opportunities for upward mobility created by post-war demographic imbalances and the westward flight of others, there might also be the effects of ‘cognitive dissonance’ (to adopt Festinger’s concept), in that they had a subjective interest in having positive views about their own lives in the GDR. Generational differences among women are particularly striking, given the GDR’s record on furthering women’s education and training, and providing an extensive workplace-based system of childcare and relatively generous infrastructural support for families, to ensure the compatibility of production and reproduction (see Table 13.3). The oldest cohorts were very much more likely to appreciate the chances offered to them by the GDR than were younger women, who perhaps took the new system more for granted; and those born in the Honecker period, who were still teenagers when the Wall fell, were most acutely aware of the disadvantages attached to having grown up in the GDR, perhaps in comparison with the opportunities that had been available to their peers in the West.

Table 13.3. Extent to which females of different birth cohorts agreed with the statement that the GDR had given them 'good' or 'new' 'life chances'. Figures in percentages.

Females only	1917-24	1925-32	1933-45	1946-57	1958-69	1970-79
Strongly disagree	0	0	5.4	3.3	9.1	22.2
Partly disagree	0	5.3	7.1	6.7	2.3	22.2
Neither agree nor disagree	18.2	26.3	17.9	30	31.8	11.1
Partly agree	0	21.1	17.9	16.7	40.9	33.3
Strongly agree	72.7	31.6	44.6	40	15.9	11.1

There are a number of further respects in which both gender and generation were significant. Older GDR citizens were more likely than younger ones to have experienced high levels of work satisfaction in the GDR, and to have been more satisfied with modes of conflict resolution. Satisfaction at work was highest among cohorts who had experienced the rapid upward mobility characteristic of the GDR in the 1950s and 1960s, while those born later tended to be slightly less enthusiastic about their workplace experiences. (The very youngest in the survey had, of course, not been old enough to have started employment during the existence of the GDR.) It is also notable that women, who had historically 'benefited' most from upward social mobility, at least as far as the slightly contentious measure of this in terms of increased participation in paid employment outside the household is concerned, were proportionately significantly more likely than men to claim to have experienced very high levels of work satisfaction. Whatever the debates about the 'double burden' of responsibility for both household and work, women appear in retrospect to have highly valued their high rates of participation in the East German paid labour force.

Interestingly, too, respondents generally claimed relatively high levels of satisfaction with modes of conflict resolution at work, despite the fact that it is conventionally thought that the state-run trade union organisation, the FDGB, barely played a serious role in terms of representation of people's genuine interests (except in so far as it was concerned with distribution of holiday home places and similar). The brigade seems in retrospect to have been particularly important as a locus for conflict resolution: over one-third (36.6 percent) mentioned this as most important, among which one-quarter mentioned it as the sole vehicle, whereas just over 11 percent mentioned a combination of brigade and FDGB; a further 10.7 percent mentioned the

FDGB and/or BGL (the works union leadership) as crucial without mentioning the brigade. Virtually one-quarter of respondents (24.4 percent) thought that conflicts had been successfully resolved through their own individual efforts and initiative; and 8.1 percent claimed that *Eingaben* had been the key to success. Many respondents pointed to the importance in conflict resolution of processes of informal discussions (or *Gespräche*) within the work-based collective. A surprisingly high proportion alleged that there had been no work conflicts. What matters here is less whether these statistics accurately reflect what went on in the workplace, and rather more the emotional tone they convey about satisfaction in and with the lost world of GDR work—undoubtedly remembered in somewhat rosier tones than it was experienced at the time, but arguably conveying an emotional truth rooted in the unemployment of contemporary Germany.

Rather surprisingly, with respect to what most people would immediately see as the worst aspects of life in the GDR, the results of questionnaires highlight the tremendous importance in East Germans' own perceptions of their successful development of coping strategies in the GDR, alongside a sense of control and the exertion of an active self capable of dealing competently with the world. Under the East German system, many felt they knew the parameters and knew how to deal with even the worst aspects of the system.

As far as the ubiquitous economic and material shortages were concerned, East Germans were obviously the first to recognise that their system was, literally as well as metaphorically, not delivering the goods. Relative lack of availability of food and consumer goods is, however, retrospectively seen as less problematic than restrictions on freedom of expression and movement. In relative terms, the results across five separate questions, each asking respondents to rate the extent to which they found the particular aspect in question to be a significant problem in everyday life, were as follows: 16.3 percent agreed either 'somewhat' or 'strongly' that food was a significant problem in everyday life; 30.3 percent agreed 'somewhat' or 'strongly' that lack of available consumer goods was a problem; 37.3 percent thought 'somewhat' or 'strongly' that housing was a problem; 50.2 percent thought 'somewhat' or 'strongly' that lack of freedom of opinion was a problem; and 56.5 percent agreed 'somewhat' or 'strongly' that lack of freedom to travel was a problem. Yet in each case, there were comments qualifying these observations, and demonstrating ways in which they had developed coping strategies, mechanisms for getting around problems or fulfilling needs and aspirations in some other way—or adjusting their aspirations according to availability. In retrospect, for the vast majority of those questioned, economic constraints and material shortages appear to have been experienced as manageable and predictable, and not generally sufficient to make life

intolerable. They frequently referred to such problems as non-availability of recordings of western music, the long waiting lists for cars, the lack of exotic fruits (*Südfrüchte*); but many also explicitly queried the notion of 'needs'. Some respondents mentioned that it was necessary to lower one's expectations and aspirations (*Ansprüche*), and to learn to make do with what one had. As one respondent put it: 'Through acquired modesty of aspirations I had fewer problems in this respect'.³⁸ Others made comments such as 'Well, we lived here after all, and had to survive and adapt'.³⁹ Expressions reflecting the view that, if one could not change reality, one could only change one's own perceptions to make reality acceptable—or the recognition of what was possible, and the need to adjust oneself accordingly—were common (*'sich arrangieren'*, *'sich anpassen'*, *'wir mußten aber entsprechend anspruchslos sein'*). Clearly the reflection that 'freedom is the recognition of necessity' found widespread resonance in the GDR.

Thus, alternatives were sought and found; and significant numbers of people professed themselves to have been largely contented with what they did and could do. Many suggested that while it might have been nice to be able to travel in the West, they also had great fun on the holidays they did go on, in the GDR or elsewhere in the Soviet bloc. As one respondent put it, he managed to deal with the problems of everyday life 'without complications, one just had to deal with things as they were'; and his greatest pleasure in life, that which made him most happy, was 'holidays at the Baltic'.⁴⁰ At the same time, many mentioned that the economic constraints of today—particularly the difficulties in raising the money required for travel—ultimately have the same effects as the political constraints obtaining in the GDR. Large numbers pointed to the new form of denial of consumer choice in the capitalist united Germany, in that they now had a wide range of goods readily available in the shops, but inadequate money with which to buy the things they desired; some felt in effect worse off than in the GDR. In short, East Germans were highly aware of the relative constraints and opportunities provided by both kinds of system, and the fact that there are different winners and losers in each. Very few agreed with the strident views of a small minority, that the Wall should be rebuilt.

On the other hand, certain aspects of GDR society were in retrospect valued very highly indeed. There were extraordinarily high levels of strong agreement with statements such as, 'The sense of togetherness among

38. QN170, born 1952: 'Durch anerzogener Bescheidenheit hatte ich damit weniger Probleme'.

39. QN 154, female, 1928.

40. QN 214, male, born 1942.

citizens (*Zusammenhalt der Bürger*) was stronger in the GDR than it is today', and spontaneous comments in open-ended questions very often brought up the strong sense of community (such as in the frequent use of the word '*Miteinander*', conveying a sense of togetherness). One or two saw this, perhaps realistically given the high degree of informal inter-reliance for obtaining scarce goods and services through 'connections' (*Beziehungen*), as a 'community of need' or '*Notgemeinschaft*'; and many emphasised the central importance of cultivating 'connections'. Yet the sense of community which this fostered—the need to remain on friendly terms with others, in a network of mutually supportive groups—was one which, particularly perhaps in retrospect, many people claim to have valued highly, in contrast to the loneliness produced by the competitive individualism of the capitalist market society of united Germany. In the words of one respondent, in answer to one of the final open questions asking if there was anything they wished to add: 'There were no specific experiences, apart from the often very good relationships between people [*außer den oft sehr guten zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen*] and a certain sticking together, both of which disappeared very quickly after the "Wende".'⁴¹ The notion of good relationships between people was brought up again and again in the survey.

Many respondents valued and explicitly mentioned the fact that in the GDR, they suffered lower levels of stress and enjoyed more time for family and friends, than they did in united Germany, particularly with family and friends now scattered over a far wider geographical area (a somewhat ironic by-product of the capitalist labour market, given that one of the most painful features of the GDR was the way in which families were separated by the 'Iron Curtain', and people in the East were physically cut off from any possibility of maintaining routine ties with friends and relatives in the West). Education and training came out rather well: what was seen as good about the GDR was, for example, 'a sensible school education, with guaranteed professional training, and then straight away afterwards a job'.⁴² Another commented that 'the school system was without question better. What goes on in schools today is totally unacceptable in the view of people of my age.'⁴³ One respondent summarised her 'good times' in the following terms: '1961–1989: Life was much more peaceful (*Man lebte viel ruhiger*), everyone had work. No one had to worry about losing their job. Existence was secure. People understood each other better, there was no "elbow society". Children were looked after in child day care centres (*Kitas*) and the school system was

41. QN 214, male, born 1942.

42. QN 211, male, 1976.

43. QN 168, female, born 1961.

much better than nowadays. In free time one was well looked after in the sports association or in the school choir and so on.⁴⁴ Many claimed that, during GDR times, they were able to engage in cultural, sporting, and other leisure activities, to enjoy subsidised holidays and travel, and to spend unpressured time with friends: they thought in retrospect that they used to have the time, the facilities, and the resources to have what was both a satisfying and affordable leisure time. But as one respondent put it, summarising the reasons why she had ticked the box for 'partly agree' in relation to the GDR giving her good life chances: 'a solid education; social security; but also eternal uniformity/stagnation/not being able to have an independent voice (*Bevormundung*) / constriction of the individual personality'.⁴⁵ Those—a minority in this survey—who wanted the space to 'think differently', to use the famous Rosa Luxemburg phrase, were well aware of the limits.

As far as political involvement is concerned, the results of the survey demonstrate that the picture is slightly more complex than often portrayed: there was what might be called a widespread 'simultaneity of participation, commitment and dissent'. A small minority were very clearly in the oppositional category, and were discriminated against to greater or lesser degrees for a number of reasons: because they were Christian, political dissidents, and in a few cases, allegedly because they refused to conform or join a political party, although many mentioned that such refusals had never caused them any problems at work or in any other way. Some reported that they felt their careers had been held back, that they had been unable to study the subject of their choice or had been forced to go into an area of work that they did not really want. Ways of coping, subjectively, included the fairly frequent comment that one had to 'adapt oneself' and 'conform to the system' (*sich anpassen*)—but this was often accompanied by the qualification that this was true in any system and it was merely expressed in different ways in the current system of united Germany. There was, then, a very high level of awareness of the unwritten 'rules' of the GDR to which one had to conform in order to achieve one's own ends, and explicit knowledge of the likely consequences of breaking these rules. The majority, on the evidence of this questionnaire, certainly played by the rules; very few were prepared to stick out and take the consequences in terms of personal disadvantages (even, in a couple of cases, imprisonment).

High rates of participation in the East German system, in one way or another, are far from neat: no easy separations can be drawn between 'state' and 'society', those 'supporting' and those 'opposing' the system. East Germans

44. QN 101, female, born 1961.

45. QN 119, female, born 1956.

often simultaneously occupied multiple positions and held highly differentiated sets of opinions on different aspects of life in the GDR. There are quite a few cases where what one might think to be mutually incompatible positions are held simultaneously, such as the Christian who was also a functionary for over twenty years in one of the mass organisations, the German League for Sport and Gymnastics (DTSB).⁴⁶ Ordinary membership levels in mass organisations (as we know anyway from statistics kept at the time) were very high: in this survey, 78 percent claimed to have been a member of the Trade Union organisation (FDGB); 68 percent had been a member of a youth organisation (JP, FDJ), and nearly 15 percent had held functionary positions of one sort or another in these organisations; around 60 percent had been a member of one or more of the other mass organisations, with 25 percent claiming to have been a member of two or more. As far as length of membership of one organisation or another was concerned, as many as 60 percent claimed to have remained a member for more than ten years. This was for obvious reasons in case of the FDGB, membership of which was more or less automatic for those in employment; but membership of other mass organisations also seemed to be fairly lengthy, as appropriate, and respondents claimed there were few or no problems if they chose to leave. Length of service as a functionary divided quite sharply: just under a quarter of those who recalled taking on a role as a functionary served for less than three years, while two-thirds claim to have acted in this role for over ten years, with remarkably few managing to escape service at an intermediate length of time; those who were not found wanting, or who did not fall foul of superiors fairly early on, presumably had the commitment and character attributes required to stick it out for a more extensive term of office. Only 6 percent claimed to have been 'very active' in the organisations with which they were involved; a further 39 percent thought that they were 'fairly active' or somewhat active', but a bare majority clearly managed to remain rather inactive in the organisations of which they were nominal members.

Reasons for belonging tended to group around a combination of what was seen as 'just normal' and social or idealistic motives. More than half claimed that they simply joined 'because everyone belonged at the time'; around one-quarter gave as a reason for membership 'because it was fun'; around one-fifth thought that they could help to improve conditions; and one in ten felt that a particular membership 'was expected in my position'.⁴⁷ Membership and

46. QN 224, male, born 1933; nicely falling at the generational cusp of the cohorts who were disproportionately active in and committed to the GDR and those who remained committed Christians.

47. Statistics are here given in only rough terms, because this turned out to be a somewhat poorly designed question, which was open to a degree of ambiguity in interpretation, with some respondents apparently unsure whether to give one or more reasons for each membership. I have

participation in the structures of the GDR 'societal state' was, then, widely seen as 'perfectly normal': 'everyone belonged' and for significant numbers the activities were enjoyable as well as giving them a feeling they could contribute to improving the world around them. Membership of youth organisations was associated with particularly fond memories for some participants: one young woman, born in 1970, in answer to the question of what was her greatest pleasure in life, what made her happy, identified 'collective outings and arts and crafts afternoons with the class, Pioneer afternoons'.⁴⁸ Another, the youngest in the survey, born in 1977, also replied to this question 'life in the Pioneer organisation, togetherness in school!'⁴⁹ The 'two lives theory', retreating in to the 'niche society' (Günter Gaus's notion of a 'niche society' or *Nischengesellschaft*), living on two tracks, speaking with two tongues (*Doppelgleisigkeit*, *Doppelzüngigkeit*), used to be very popular in secondary literature on GDR, but only a couple of respondents mention anything coming at all close to this notion; the majority seem to have been entirely at one with themselves, if one may put it this way, in their participatory activities.

Only a minority stood out as having not participated in any way at all in the GDR's organisational framework, and this minority was divided between two very different groups: some older individuals who had been too old to join the FDJ, and had evaded joining the FDGB; and a minority of very committed political activists, largely Christians. A very small number claimed they had suffered as a result of their refusal to join in with, for example, the *Jugendweihe* (the state atheist coming of age ceremony, in opposition to confirmation in church); while six said that there were no problems arising from their refusal, three claimed that their refusal to conform or to join an organisation had brought with it 'bad consequences' for them.

Those living through an 'age of ideologies' were, as we have repeatedly seen, in some ways themselves more 'ideological'—more likely to be a member of the SED if they were born between 1926 and 1933, more likely to be and remain a Christian if born during the Third Reich. The '1929ers' were generally more likely to be functionaries, highly active, participatory citizens of the GDR. They were more extreme in terms not merely of their prior experiences, but also their subsequent reactions: their comparisons of standards of living in the GDR tended to be with their own war-time and post-war deprivations. But, very interestingly, they also tended to be far more consciously aware of the 'costs' of the GDR in terms of *Stasi* surveillance:

therefore tried to avoid unduly weighting the answers of the more enthusiastic respondents, but want here merely to convey the general gist that emerges from looking at the overall pattern of answers.

48. QN 240, female, born 1970.

49. QN 237, female, born 1977.

they claimed to have known more about the *Stasi*, and to have had more contact with the unofficial collaborators or IMs (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*) than did younger cohorts of former citizens of the GDR. Those born into the GDR were, by contrast, much less likely to be as satisfied with their work, and less satisfied with modes of conflict resolution at work. They were also less likely to think there were high levels of ‘togetherness’ or *Zusammenhalt* among East Germans. But they were, at the same time, less likely to have experienced the *Stasi* as important, and less likely to claim to have had any direct experience of the *Stasi* through knowledge of an IM. All of this in part reflects their younger age group and related statuses while in the GDR—occupying relatively low levels in any hierarchy, and hence to some extent having lower relevance for the *Stasi* unless they were a member of one of the tiny minority of dissident groups, which the vast majority were not. This raises, then, very directly the question of perceptions of repression and restrictions on freedom in the GDR; topics about which East Germans held highly differentiated views.

The ‘Normality of Evil’? Perceptions of the *Stasi* and the Sense of ‘Freedom’

The *Stasi* has loomed very large in writing on the GDR, from the popularisation of the ‘repression thesis’ view of the GDR in works such as *Stasiland*, or the perhaps more problematic ‘rendering harmless’ (*Verharmlosung*) of the *Stasi* in works of fiction such as Thomas Brussig’s *Helden wie Wir* (Brussig was born in 1965), to an extensive body of highly critical academic and journalistic literature.⁵⁰ There is little doubt that, along with the very visible restrictions on freedom of movement posed by the highly fortified inner-German border and Berlin Wall, the *Stasi* has dominated general perceptions of what life in the GDR must have been like for its citizens.

And yet, at least on the evidence of this research, it did not loom so large in most people’s perceptions and sense of being able to live ‘perfectly normal lives’ in the GDR. The fact that the questionnaire even posed a question about the *Stasi* annoyed a surprising number of people. The first survey, which included rather more by way of questions on the *Stasi*, provoked comments such as ‘*Generally with respect to the Stasi-questions: My experiences in life*

50. Anna Funder, *Stasiland* (London: Granta, 2003); Thomas Brussig, *Helden wie Wir* (Berlin: Verlag Volk & Welt, 1995); for an overview of the academic literature which burgeoned in the first decade after unification, see for example Jens Gieseke, ‘Die Geschichte der Staatssicherheit’, in Rainer Eppelmann, Bernd Faulenbach, and Ulrich Maehlert, eds., *Bilanz und Perspektiven der DDR-Forschung* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003).

and my own life story in the GDR have in absolutely no way been influenced by the *Stasi*! Why should this play *any role at all* in this questionnaire!?'⁵¹ One of the principal revisions between the pilot study and the questionnaire, which was finally used in the larger survey, was to tone down and reduce the section devoted to questions on the *Stasi*, since so many people were irritated and suspicious about these questions and refused to answer these questions (or indeed to answer the questionnaire at all) on the pilot version. The final version of the questionnaire, then, included only two very simple sets of questions on the *Stasi*: first, 'Was knowledge of the existence of the *Stasi* important to you in your daily life?' (answerable by tick-boxes for 'yes', 'no', and 'somewhat') and, 'If so, in what respects?' (where an open-ended qualitative response was required); and secondly, 'Did you know anyone personally who was active as a *Stasi* informer (IM)?' again answerable in terms of tick-boxes ('yes', 'no', 'not as far as I am aware'), with the correlate question, 'If yes: how did this knowledge influence your relationship with that person?' Even here, there were difficulties with getting responses.⁵²

This survey of a significant number of 'ordinary East Germans' produced a rather more multi-faceted view than the pictures conveyed in analyses of selected cases of individual *Stasi* victims or 'perpetrators'. For the vast majority of those surveyed, the *Stasi* was simply unimportant. Three-fifths (60 percent) claimed not to have experienced the *Stasi* as important at all; a further 20 percent found the *Stasi* 'somewhat' important, but even among these there were comments such as '[but] I barely bothered myself about it'.⁵³ Only one in five (20 percent) experienced the *Stasi* as sufficiently important to tick the box for 'yes'—and among these, a surprising number were actually supporters of *Stasi*, and thought it did a good and necessary job in maintaining 'security'. Methodologically, this may actually be something of an underestimate, since a number of people refused to answer this question, and those refusing are probably disproportionately drawn from those who might well have feared personal disadvantages if such views were brought into the daylight of united Germany.

There were, of course, a number of people in the survey, across all age groups, who had suffered very bad experiences as a result of *Stasi* surveillance, persecution, and incarceration. A former architect was in 1963

51. L18 (1949), emphasis in the original.

52. One colleague working at a senior citizens' home, who kindly agreed to assist with distributing questionnaires and posting back responses from elderly residents, wrote explicitly in his covering letter that unfortunately only two people had been willing to respond precisely because of this question. 'We reassured them about the anonymity of the survey. . . . Nevertheless most of them had difficulties and fears about the questions concerning the *Stasi*.' Letter of 7 July 2005.

53. QN 167, male, born 1966.

subjected to four years imprisonment as a result of seeking to help someone escape the GDR (*Republikflucht*) and spent the 23 years following his release unable to practise his profession, but forced instead to ‘work in production’ in a VEB (‘people’s own factory’) at the lowest wage level.⁵⁴ (This particular individual had a fairly awful combination of historical experiences, having been called up for military service in 1944 at the age of 16, and was in 2005 still suffering from nightmares both about scenes he had witnessed towards the end of the war, such as seeing deserters being hung or having to step over corpses in the street, as well as nightmares about his sleep deprivation, ill-treatment, and interrogations during *Stasi* imprisonment in the 1960s.) One Christian member of an oppositional group for peace and the environment from 1985, and member of New Forum in 1989, lists among her ‘worst times’ a very specific experience: participation in the demonstration on 6–7 October 1989 at the Gethsemane Church in East Berlin, being surrounded by the *Stasi* and being ‘terrified for her life’ (*große Existenzangst*).⁵⁵ Interestingly, however, in terms of the coexistence of quite different experiences of and a differentiated attitude towards the GDR, this very same person had listed among the ‘best times’ in her life the period 1985/86, when she had ‘intensively pursued her hobbies’, including folk dancing, rowing and making music, as well as being young, financially independent, and in love. A number of respondents, without giving any specifics, claimed to have lived with a significant sense of ‘permanent surveillance’ (*ständige Überwachung*) or a diffuse feeling of being constantly ‘under threat’ (*Bedrohung*). Others suggested that it made it difficult to talk to friends at the time, and revelations about *Stasi* informers after 1990 had been personally devastating: ‘Once I knew it (the IM confessed to me) I immediately broke off all contact—it was a massive loss of trust.’⁵⁶

Many developed coping strategies of one sort or another, such that—almost like swatting unwanted insects at a summer picnic—the *Stasi* became for them a predictable and manageable evil in an otherwise tolerable or enjoyable life. One Christian who was, for example, very critical of the political discrimination in the GDR and the pressure on her children in school, commented about an IM in her acquaintance that she simply ‘kept her distance’.⁵⁷ (She too had a difficult background: her father had died in captivity as a Soviet Prisoner of War when she was only eleven; the family business had been expropriated; and the ‘basis for existence for my mother

54. QN 151, male, born 1928.

55. QN 64, female, born 1966.

56. QN 119, female, born 1956.

57. QN 153, female, born 1934.

and we three children was utterly destroyed (*vernichtet*’.) Some treated the *Stasi* as a somewhat humourous element in life: ‘We made a bit of a joke out of it. We observed the *Stasi* observing us.’⁵⁸ Many others simply treated the *Stasi* as quite routine, a ‘perfectly normal’ part of life, particularly in certain occupations: ‘As a teacher, checks were frequently being carried out and questions posed concerning parents of particular children’⁵⁹; ‘In the factory—professionally—I saw it as legitimate’;⁶⁰ ‘Anyone who worked in sport and was able to travel abroad (to the USA, Italy, Yugoslavia, Spain) with sports delegations had personal contacts [with the *Stasi*] without being an unofficial collaborator!!!’⁶¹ Some even had something of a friendly relationship with people they knew to be informers; in one case, the neighbour, who was an IM, even directly told the respondent on whom she was reporting whenever she had been questioned about this person by the *Stasi*.⁶²

Among those who said the *Stasi* was important to them in their everyday life, there were also a surprisingly large number of positive answers with respect to the role of the *Stasi*: for example, the *Stasi* was important in everyday life by virtue of its ‘Protection of our achievement in building up from the ruins’ (hard to render the ideological flavour of the original in English: *Schutz des von uns geleisteten Aufbaus*).⁶³ Another commented in some detail that: ‘I have only got to know the expression “*Stasi*” since 1989. Until then, for me it was the MfS, whose rules had to be observed in professional life (*Berufsleben*) in just the same way as the regulations of the police, the education system, the transport system, the health system and so on. As far as I was concerned, the MfS was not the “worst” institution.’⁶⁴ A number suggest that being an IM was not important in choosing one’s friends: ‘But [I knew the IM] only as someone working for the Ministry for State Security. This did not influence my relationship with this friend at all, since every state has an organisation for state security. I chose my friends according to their character traits.’⁶⁵ Others, on revealing that they knew someone was an IM, simply said that this did not influence their relationship with the person at all—‘garnicht!’⁶⁶ Some go on to compare the current situation in united Germany unfavourably with the GDR, as in the comment from a younger

58. QN 263, female, born 1949.

59. QN 166, male, born 1921.

60. QN 206, male, born 1948.

61. L18, born 1949.

62. QN 154, female, born 1928, member of the SED.

63. QN 52, male, born 1935.

64. QN 134, male, born 1936.

65. QN 136, female, born 1934.

66. QN 142, female, born 1959.

East German who claimed that, while knowing a *Stasi* informer had not influenced her relationship to this person at all, in stark contrast ‘today we are subjected to surveillance by the BND [secret service of the Federal Republic] and there is no doubt a great deal more going on there that we don’t know about. Just think about America—total surveillance (*totale Überwachung*).’⁶⁷

Most East Germans, at least on the evidence of their retrospective claims in 2005, appear to have known how to cope with the *Stasi*: one might want to talk about a process of ‘routinisation of evil’, in that people knew what to say to whom in what context, and with whom they should maintain a purely formal and distanced relationship. They had expectations about when and where they might have to engage in confrontation—or professional cooperation—with either a paid functionary of the MfS, in the course of their work, or with an unofficial informer. There were significant, indeed massive, differences in the ‘density’ of exposure to the *Stasi*. Christians and people with oppositional political views obviously experienced the *Stasi* as far more threatening and oppressive, denying them the possibility of leading their lives as they wanted; yet a majority of the East Germans surveyed did not fall into these categories.

Proportionately, those born between 1925 and 1957, who experienced life in the GDR as adults for well over a decade, were far more likely to be affected by knowledge of the *Stasi* than were younger generations. Those most affected by knowledge of the *Stasi* were the cohorts born during the Third Reich, for 27.1 percent of whom knowledge of the *Stasi* had significance in their everyday lives, contrasted with a mere 12.5 percent of those born between 1958 and 1969. This ‘Wall generation’, however, again hedged its bets slightly: over a quarter (26.4 percent) gave the answer ‘somewhat’, compared to an overall average of 16.2 percent, with a low of 5.3 percent for ‘somewhat’ among the more decisive immediately following birth cohorts of 1970–79, and 6.9 percent among the ‘1929ers’. The least concerned were, perhaps oddly, the oldest and youngest cohorts: over two-thirds (66.7 percent) of those born from 1917 to 1924 thought the *Stasi* was not at all important, and nearly four out of five (78.9 percent) of those born in the 1970s saw the *Stasi* as not at all important in their lives, whereas only a little over a half (54.1 percent) of those born during the Third Reich gave this answer. Certain (28.2 percent) or suspected (25.9 percent) knowledge of someone who was a *Stasi* informer (IM) also clustered disproportionately among those born during the Third Reich, although there is an odd feature here: by far the highest proportions of those who, cumulatively, either thought (41.7 percent) or were certain (22.2 percent) that they knew a *Stasi* informer were to be found among the ‘Wall generation’ born

67. QN 127, female, born 1976.

from 1958 to 1969. It is curious that nearly two-thirds (63.9 percent) of this cohort thought they knew a *Stasi* informer personally, yet virtually the same percentage (61.6 percent) did not consider the *Stasi* to be important in their lives: there is clearly some degree of routinisation at work here, among cohorts who had learnt through socialisation to negotiate the conditions in which they lived. The fact that significantly fewer people born after 1969—i.e., those aged below 20 when the Wall fell—had either any personal exposure to the *Stasi*, or any sense that it was important in their lives, may help to explain the trend towards a 'rendering harmless' (*Verharmlosung*) and ironic presentation of the 'GDR as comedy' evident among many younger post-*Wende* literary authors.

If women shared with older cohorts a greater probability of seeing the GDR as having offered them good life chances, they now appeared to have a double bonus in their experiences of the GDR. Women are proportionately less likely to claim to have been bothered by knowledge of the existence of the *Stasi*, and less likely to have known an informer or IM, than men. Overall, nearly a quarter of men (24.5 percent) and just under one-fifth of women (18.9 percent) saw the *Stasi* as important; just over a half (53.9 percent) of men and nearly two-thirds (62.7 percent) of women felt it was entirely unimportant (and the rest, of course, were respectively in the 'somewhat' or the 3.3 percent of 'no answer' categories). Around one-quarter of both males (24.5 percent) and females (24.9 percent) were certain they knew an informer, while over one-third (34.3 percent) of males, but again only a quarter (24.3 percent) of females, replied that they 'maybe' knew an IM, leaving considerably more males than females living with a shade of suspicion. Apart from the handful of 'no answers', the remaining 37.3 percent of males and 46.2 percent of females were certain they did not personally know a *Stasi* informer. Thus, while women somewhat disproportionately felt that they were the beneficiaries of GDR social policies allowing the combination of family life and fulfilment in work, at the same time they were less likely to register the shadow sides of the East German dictatorship in terms of repression and surveillance.⁶⁸

Although on the basis of this evidence there is no need at all to revise any moral and political views of the self-confessed practices of the *Stasi* in surveillance, intimidation, and destruction (*Zersetzung*) of the lives, relationships, and careers of individuals, there does appear to be some need for qualification of views concerning the extent to which knowledge of these practices played a role in the lives of individuals who did not come into the net of the *Stasi*, or who indeed themselves approved of the activities of

68. It also has, however, to be borne in mind that women were greater 'losers' in the unification process and economic restructuring than were men; it is possible therefore that their memories and representations of life in the GDR are likely to be marginally more positively tinged.

the MfS in maintaining a measure of ‘security’. The GDR was essentially a society which certainly had polar extremes, but where there was a great deal of grey area, of compromise, adaptation, and complexity in between. And for those—probably a majority of the population—occupying an ambiguous position in the cross-currents of the complex middle ground, the *Stasi* was, as one respondent put it, ‘not nearly as important as it is portrayed today’.⁶⁹

The ‘Normalisation of Rule’? East German Perspectives and the History of the GDR

We know a lot about the dark sides of the GDR: we know a lot about the outward signs of visible repression in a state which prevented freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement. We know a lot, too, about the less visible pressures under which many people felt they lived in such a society. These were well summarised by a woman born in 1956, who did not find it easy to come to terms with the state into which she had been born and within which she was socialised:

You could lead a ‘normal’ life if your life conformed to the expectations of the state. That meant: not stepping out of line, not attracting attention to yourself politically, no activities on your own initiative or opinions that were not handed down to you; if you were punctual and reliable in your work, if there was nothing out of the ordinary in the personal arena, then a ‘normal’ life was possible. Difficulties arose if you became active or expressed opinions that were not along the prescribed lines—it was a dictatorship with not a whiff of democracy!⁷⁰

A ‘normal’ life was on this view a life lived within the narrow parameters of the officially prescribed ‘norms’, which, for those who wanted to think outside these limits, were experienced as highly restricting. All this is well documented and well known.

What is more difficult to get at, however, is a sense of the way in which a significant number of East Germans seem to have valued this notion of a ‘normal life’, and valued what they saw as the orderliness and security of GDR society—and this too is a real aspect of GDR history, although one which has to date been far less well researched. The sense of knowing the rules, playing by the rules, even valuing the regularities of a predictable life, come across in many ways in people’s responses, some in part critical or resigned, others far more

69. QN 206, male, born 1948.

70. QN 119, female, born 1956.

positive about their experiences and the patterns of their lives in the GDR. An eighty-year old woman, who had lived all of her life in Fürstenberg / Eisenhüttenstadt, summed up her life in the GDR very simply: 'We had a normal life with my four children. As far as exotic fruits [*Südfruchte*] were concerned, it was bad. Otherwise it was not bad.'⁷¹ A Christian, born in 1940, commented that 'I came to terms with it and saw it as God's path for me'.⁷² A male, 'born into' the GDR in 1966, summarised his view thus: 'One could lead a perfectly normal life in the GDR, if one kept to certain rules (but that is just the same today). One didn't starve, there was always food, maybe not the choice we have today (but is that necessary) . . . As long as one has work [today] things are okay, but if not it's bad. . . . Competition may enliven business, but at what price?'⁷³ A male, who was still in his teens when the Wall came down, commented that in the GDR one had 'the prospect of an orderly life [*ein geregeltes Leben*], with a sensible job.' A woman born in 1939 said that in the GDR, 'It was peaceful, there was contentment and harmony in family and profession—security on the streets—the health system was in order'.⁷⁴ Another woman, born in 1957, simply summarised the GDR thus: 'The GDR was in order (*in Ordnung*), only freedom of travel was limited, that was not in order (*nicht in Ordnung*)'.⁷⁵

The GDR, for all its recognised shortcomings, was for many of its former citizens '*in Ordnung*': it appeared to be an 'orderly' form of society; for those who liked the form of order, and were prepared to live within the rules, it was experienced as 'normal'; and indeed for many East Germans a predictable life with assured employment, a sense of community, and social security, was far less stressful than the uncertainties and the new restrictions on freedom caused by lack of money, as widely experienced in the period since unification. As one respondent put it, 'One had the opportunity of learning a profession, there was no unemployment, everyone had housing they could afford, it was possible to take holidays in other socialist countries. . . . Today one hits one's head against a brick wall because one can't afford things. All in all, [in the GDR] I lived more peacefully and in greater security. . . I had a sense of well-being'.⁷⁶ In the words of another: 'Good times: Up to 1990: Life ran in regular tracks with normal ups and downs. Without anxiety.'⁷⁷ 'Normal' here means 'what one would expect'—in the sphere of family, friends, leisure, work—where

71. QN 116, female, born 1925.

72. QN 187, male, born 1940.

73. QN 167, male, born 1966.

74. QN 173, female, born 1939.

75. QN 203, female, born 1957.

76. QN 175, female, born 1954.

77. QN 56, female, born 1961. (*Bis 1990: Das Leben war in geregelten Bahnen mit normalen Höhen und Tiefen. Ohne Ängste.*)

all is not necessarily always wonderful, where one expects ‘ups and downs’, sadness, and discord as well as happiness and success. ‘Abnormal’ is when the rules change, and when one is constantly anxious about the future and how to survive. One respondent, born in 1941, designated the years up to 1990 as the best years of her life, ‘but only in the light of my experience now’; she knew that she had lacked freedom to travel and to express her opinions, but now what she most valued about the GDR was that she ‘had lived in a *secure* and ordered’ society (*habe sicher und geordnet gelebt*, underlining in original).⁷⁸ A slightly older respondent, born in 1938, summarised the contrasts between the GDR and the present in the following list: In the GDR, there was ‘social security, security of pensions, a sense of collective responsibility, work, being there for one another, being together . . . a preparedness to help, honesty. All gone now.’⁷⁹

For others in the GDR, this sense of orderliness and regulation was of course by contrast experienced as living in a ‘cage’ (*Käfig*).⁸⁰ That this was a highly apposite description for life in a literally walled-in state should not blind us to the fact that, experientially, the same can be said about the capitalist system for those constrained to operate by its rules or go under—as Max Weber famously reminded us in his use of the term ‘*ein stahlhartes Gehäuse*’, conventionally translated as the ‘iron cage’ of the ‘spirit of capitalism’. As one woman, born in 1960, very appositely put it, in the context of a longer and highly differentiated picture of her life in the GDR:

Of course I found aspects of everyday life in the GDR very negative, but in many ways I have not been able to shake off these feelings today. . . In the normal working day in the GDR one was constantly subject to political agitation, one was always supposed to be politically engaged and ‘do things collectively’ in the Brigade, in the FDGB, in the Party etc. etc. etc.—but if you didn’t go along with it nothing happened to you either. Of course that meant that you also could not get into ‘leading positions’, but I never wanted that anyway. Today you still have to spring to attention and do what is ordered ‘from above’—and if you do not go along with it, your job is perhaps at risk and your means of livelihood endangered. There are lots of other examples I could give to develop this point.

In general, I do not really feel any more free now than I did in the GDR—pressure is pressure (*Zwang ist Zwang*)—from whatever direction it might come, and everyone has to decide for themselves how far they are prepared to go along with it or to ‘jump off the bandwagon’ and remove themselves from such influences.⁸¹

78. QN 213, female, born 1941.

79. QN 161, female, born 1938.

80. QN 168, female, born 1961.

81. QN 152, female, born 1960.

It is these antinomies that lie at the heart of the difficulties in interpreting patterns of 'normalisation' in the GDR. One could go on multiplying examples from the very rich and extensive comments that East Germans made on these questionnaires in the summer of 2005. The differentiated comments, and the detailed evaluations of different aspects of life, reveal just how deeply many of them have registered the contrasting 'rules' of life under 'actually existing socialism' and under the system of capitalism as experienced on the ground among ordinary people in the eastern part of the expanded Federal Republic of Germany. To seek to dismiss these perceptions as a bad case of *Ostalgie* or the long-term consequences of ideological indoctrination would be both historically inaccurate and utterly unfair to the people who have personally lived through, and thought most deeply about, the consequences of living in these two systems; and whose views have directly relevant implications for their own sense of self, security, and future perspectives. The 'people's own voices' perhaps deserve more respect in a democracy than to deny their validity as essentially misguided misperceptions, or (ironically) the effects of suffering from a form of 'false consciousness'. They deserve, at least, to be given a hearing as an authentic expression of subjective experiences, even if the sophisticated observer will pick up on certain patterns of discourse in a given historical context.⁸²

It would be too simple to come to more general conclusions about broader normalisation processes in the GDR on the basis of this selection of retrospective reflections. But perhaps the material presented here will serve both to reinsert into a wider comparative context the experiences of people living through the second half of the twentieth century in Eastern Germany; and to problematise any unthinking use of notions of 'normal' and 'normality' from any one hegemonic perspective. The regularity and predictability of even unpleasant aspects of life seem to have been for some East Germans more comfortable than living with new uncertainties, despite greater freedom—a form of Durkheimian anomie. If the concept of 'normalisation' can be constructed as an ideal type, focussing on both changing historical periods of stabilisation and routinisation, and on changing subjective experiences and cultural constructions of 'normality', it will allow us to explore with more open minds the ways in which people sought to make sense of their lives and to pursue what they held to be most important to them under conditions, which were, very definitely, not of everybody's choosing.

82. It is precisely to give them an explicit hearing that I have chosen in this already rather long essay to present extensive quotations.

